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ABSTRACT

Social implications of distance education at the university level are considered, based primarily on the case of La Universidad Estatal a Distancia (UNED) of Costa Rica. UNED, which is Costa Rica's attempt to implement Great Britain's open university philosophy of education, was developed in response to the following needs: to provide opportunities for university education without moving to San Jose or another large city; and the need to educate persons in specific areas of national need (e.g., education, management, agriculture, health services). Six influences or changes of the social environment brought about by this new system are as follows: (1) long-range social planning is needed; (2) new educational modes without a lecturer or classroom are adopted; (3) community and individual development may be enhanced since small study groups may become active social forces; (4) the accessibility of education is improved; (5) modern communication channels are used to convey information to learners; and (6) an interplay between this educational approach and the political atmosphere in the country may occur (i.e., distance education can be used as an instrument of the government). It is concluded that a distance education university in a Latin American culture has the potential of being a major social change agent. (SW)

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SOME SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

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SOME SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance education has been in existence for well over 100 years (Rumble & Harry, 1982), and has been used at every level of education from elementary literacy to vocational training to university education. At each level it represents a completely new approach to learning in that the student and the source of education are separated so as to make classroom education impossible. My remarks in this paper will be confined to distance education at the university level and will be based primarily on the experiences I have had with La Universidad Estatal a Distancia (UNED) of Costa Rica over the past four years. Using UNED as an example I will discuss some of the social implications of distance education at the university level in Latin America.

La Universidad Estatal a Distancia (UNED) of Costa Rica:

UNED is Costa Rica's attempt to implement the open university philosophy of education pioneered in Great Britian in the seventies. The open university system of education is essentially an administrative unit with a distance learning subsystem employing all the forms of mass media but relying primarily on the written word. There are no teachers as such, but there are tutors who hold regular tutorial sessions which students may attend. The students are expected to study on their own, and there is much less feedback on their progress than in a conventional university. This type of education demands a mature, motivated student with great perseverance.

A distance learning subsystem functions in such a way as

to enable students to learn in their home environments. Students register for courses, either independently or within a degree program (carrera), receive printed study materials, directions for study and instructions about auxiliary materials such as television programs, radio discussion programs and cassette tapes that are available to facilitate their understanding of the basic material. They are assigned to distance learning centers where they can go at specified times to meet with a tutor. They are also given the telephone numbers and times when they can call for tutorial assistance by phone. The students must turn in homework and pass two major examinations in each course to pass that course.

Like most of the Distance Education Universities (DEUs) in the world today, UNED was created by an act of the government to meet specific needs of the country (Rumble & Harry, 1982). The two basic needs that seemed to be the driving force behind its development and which determined its structure and curriculum are:

1. The need to give persons an opportunity for university education without their moving to San José or some other large city, thus stemming the migration of youth to the larger centers of population.
2. The need to educate persons in specific areas of national need, i.e., education, management, agriculture, health services (including nursing and nutrition), and cooperatives. (Borden & Tanner, 1979)

The first need is central to the philosophy of an open

university. Its structure is one that relies on all the media (print, radio, television) to make information available to students who are dispersed over a large area with limited access to centralized facilities. Teletutorials may be held with student groups or individually and thus, students may control the time they spend on their education. They need only come to a designated location to take exams. UNED has not been able to incorporate all of the latest electronic communication systems, but it is working in this direction and has developed the basic structure for a fully mediated education system (Borden, 1982).

Social Implications:

Whenever a new technology is implemented in a culture, changes occur in that culture which reflect the positive and negative aspects of that technology. Moreover, the technology also changes as it is adapted to the idiosyncrasies of the culture in which it is implemented (Borden & Tanner, 1982). The changes that occur in both the culture and the technology have social implications,i.e., the social environment will be different after the implementation of the technology from what it was before the implementation. Considering the case in point - a distance education university in Latin America - there are at least six ways in which the social environment is being affected by the implementation of this technology.

1. Necessitates Long-Range Social Planning:

What are the social implications of creating an educational system to meet specific needs of a culture? If we look at it in

the abstract sense we can envision a culture that recognizes deficiencies of some sort, being brought up to par by the creation of a DEU. This means that a less than acceptable social environment is being moved toward acceptability by the development of a new system of education. But to develop a DEU requires a tremendous amount of long-range social planning. Because it involves so many facets of a culture, it is not something that is just brought in at the whim of an administrator or government. The initial risk in terms of capital expenditure and social approval is very high, and these must be weighed very carefully against the perceived needs of the culture.

In the case of Costa Rica the importance of education has long been acknowledged, and UNED was just one innovation out of many designed to help create a desirable social environment. In 1948 Costa Rica dissolved its army and began using its military budget for education. Since then it has continually sought to increase the literacy level and the educational opportunities of its citizens. At the same time, Costa Ricans realized that it was only through education that they could attain and maintain a strong national economic and social environment. The development of a DEU specifically to fill national needs says that the country is aware of its needs and is trying to do something about them.

A second level of social implications is revealed when one considers the areas felt to be in need of more educated personnel. After considerable research, Costa Rica identified major personnel deficiencies in the areas of agriculture, health,

planning, and education (Borden & Tanner, 1980). They felt that by improving any one of these areas they would be imporving the social environment of the country. For example, in agriculture UNED established carreras in small farm administration, management of cooperatives, and extension services. In each of these areas, increased education should promote the efficient use of resources, increase human interaction, and enhance the social and economic environment. The same can be said for the other areas of need.

The consensus of civic and professional leaders, employers and students is that UNED is supplying a vital educational opportunity to its people and will increase its positive impact on the poorer classes when all of its agricultural, organizational, and health services carreras are implemented. Specifically, they feel that 1) its education is equal to conventional education but costs less, 2) its format allows students to work and study at the same time, and 3) it offers carreras in the areas of greatest need. Thus, the image that UNED has fostered is generally very positive (Borden & Tanner, 1980; Tanner, 1981; Rumble & Borden, 1983).

2. Changes Educational Relationships:

Since all innovations take place within a social system, a change in one part of the system (the education of its people) inadvertantly affects other parts of the system (Kuhn, 1974). Thus, when students begin to be educated without going to school, other parts of society are also affected. One of the effects

of this drastic departure from conventional education was apparent in the planning stages of UNED. A major objection to its creation was the cry that education without classrooms and lectures would be inferior to conventional education. These feelings have been voiced wherever DEUs have been created (Rumble & Harry, 1982).

As hard as it may be to accept the fact that students can learn without a teacher, it is equally difficult to realize that educators need not lecture. In developing a DEU one of the greatest challenges is to get tutors not to lecture. The innovativeness of this new type of educational system has direct effects on both the information disseminators and the learners, for it changes the relationships which traditionally existed between the two. The dissemination of information to the learners becomes the responsibility of two subsystems of the DEU; the academic subsystem which controls the actual administration of the courses, and the planning subsystem in which the planning of the courses, carreras and extension programs take place. The fact that a course must exist as an entity separate and apart from any professor is foreign to most conventional universities. The planning, administration and operation of a university built on this principle change the university-student, professor-student, and student-student relationships from those of a conventional university.

When a student attends a conventional university, he or she becomes a member of a social unit that has many facets. Registration, class attendance, student advising, library research,

extra curricular activities, graduation or dropping-out are only a few. In all of these aspects of student life the conventional student has a social unit within which s/he functions. If for no other reason then numbers of available students, the distance student finds it very difficult to develop this type of social network in which to find an identity. However, one of the major social changes brought about by distance education is an immergence of small study units in many of the remote villages of the country. The university becomes a stimulus to bring people together who otherwise might not have met, and these units then become a social force in that village.

3. Enhances Community and Individual Development:

As noted above, small study groups may turn into active social forces in the outlying areas of a country. One might argue that it is not necessary to create a DEU to achieve the above result. However, since only about 10% of the students from the outlying areas who attend conventional universities return to work in their home environments, this creates some very real social problems. The migration of young people to the large cities places a financial burden on the students as well as draining potential strength and talent from rural areas. Since distance education takes education to the people, it helps to stem the urban migration. UNED has found this to be true, and this is one of its positive assets. The young people are staying on the farms and in the villages, holding jobs, building families and communities while using UNED to

better their education and their position in life.

As has been intimated, DEUs require a different type of student than do the conventional universities (Rumble & Harry, 1982). It may be that only this type of student seeks out the DEUs, but it is more likely that students who attend the DEUs become this type of student. In either case, we see the DEU students being able to learn without much outside stimulation and help, becoming more independent, and generally being more in charge of their own lives (Tanner, 1980).

When DEU students graduate they are better able to use their education in their jobs, as most of them have been employed full time while going to school. Employers generally feel that these graduates are more mature and responsible than are their conventional university counterparts. This probably stems from the fact that most of them are older, married, and have settled into their communities (Tanner, 1981). Thus, the DEU students have a positive impact on the social environment.

4. Improves the Accessibility of Education:

Social rules are often looked upon as constraints on the behaviors of those who would like to change their position in life. A college education is seen as a stepping stone to a better life so that if the requirements for college entrance are difficult or impossible to meet, they become barriers to social mobility. Although UNED is not an open university in the sense of open enrollment, it does not have an enrollment quota nor an entrance exam. The only requirement, that of a

high school diploma or its equivalent, can now be secured through a distance high school program which UNED developed. This, plus the fact that anyone can take nondegree courses at UNED, would appear to make a university education accessible to most of the inhabitants of Costa Rica.

Changing the entrance requirements is not enough to insure university accessibility. When all of the universities are located in the one or two major cities of a country, this means that the students must live in these cities to attend the university. There are many reasons for not wanting or being able to move to the city for five to eight years to get a university degree (the mean time taken at conventional universities in Costa Rica). Some parents still object to their daughters leaving home and going to the university in the city. Other potential students have job or family related reasons for not being able to make this move. For all of these people, a DEU makes an education possible (Borden & Tanner, 1980).

A third dimension of accessibility is more difficult to clarify. The cost of a university education may be prohibitive. Even though most conventional universities have a beca or tuition aid system, the students from outlying areas still may have living expenses that prohibit them from attending. Without becas it can be shown that in Costa Rica a distance education is approximately half as expensive as a conventional education (Borden & Tanner, 1980). However, since DEUs benefit from economies of scale, a fully developed system with a full student

body would be even less expensive (Rumble, 1981). Thus, on the basis of academic preparedness, physical location, and financial ability the DEU imporves the accessibility of higher education.

The existence of facilities which allow formerly disenfranchised inhabitants to secure a university education changes the social environment dramatically. However, a university education may not be the most appropriate way to meet all the needs of a culture. With the mechanism in place to pursue a formal university education, the DEU is able to expand its offerings to include courses in almost any area of interest from family planning to ecology. In addition it can offer various lessons in the format of extension services, such as short courses, conferences, seminars and information retrieval services. The local DEU center can truly become the local information center.

5. Fosters the Development of All Channels of Communication:

Education can only take place when there is adequate communication between the instructional source and the learners. This is true in our everyday learning experiences as well as in our formal education. A DEU uses all the available channels to convey information to its students. In doing so it opens up the most modern communication channels to its students. This alone may have major social implications. The use of radio or television to broadcast lessons necessary for the students also makes these lessons available to non-students and increases social awareness. In 1979 one of UNED's lessons had a higher viewer rating than any of the programs shown on the other four

television channels.

Other channels of communication are just as noteworthy. A DEU must continue to pioneer in the use of computers, telephones and mail services. Teleconferencing is now becoming a major vehicle for turorials. Computer managed instruction is on the threshold of becoming a major component of the DEU. But with all of these electronic devices one still must physically move materials from one place to another, and this involves either the postal service or private carriers. The solution to the mail problem may have major social rammifications, especially if one finds the conventional system is not adequate to fill the needs of the university (James, 1979). Thus, an aggressive, forward looking policy toward improved communication technology is a major factor in the success of distance education. The DEU not only pioneers innovations in education but also in communication technology.

Although much emphasis is placed on electronic media, the most important communication channel for DEUs is that of the printed word. In developing their courses they must have books that are written in such a manner that the average student can digest the material without the aid of a teacher. This necessitates a very different approach to textbook writing than is used for conventional universities. It also means that textbooks must be printed specifically for the course and the culture. For this reason UNED has established its own publishing house and publishes nearly all of its own textbooks. Some of these textbooks are now being used by the conventional universities

and are being read by the general public. It is also publishing non-textbooks as well. The social implications of such an endeavor are hard to determine, but the publishing of more Costa Rican authors (in both textbooks and non-textbooks) has increased an awareness of them and of the existence of UNED, and has enhanced its image.

6. An Instrument of the Government:

There is one more social implication of distance education that must be mentioned. Since DEUs exist in every kind of political environment and only by decree of the government (Rumble & Harry, 1982), the social implications of this form of education must be acceptable to, if not advocated by, all types of political persuasions. It is rather easy to imagine how some of the educational philosophy might reflect the political philosophy of the government. Courses in the social sciences and humanities could easily become propaganda vehicles for the government.

A DEU does not exist in a political vacuum, and because of this there is necessarily an interplay between the political atmosphere and its social impact. I can not speculate on what this interplay might produce in some political environments, but in the Costa Rican democracy it has produced a university that has been given complete autonomy and equal status with the conventional universities. This has had far reaching effects on student enrollment, degree acceptance and the social influence of UNED.

Conclusions:

We have seen that the development of a DEU may impact on the social environment of a country in at least six different ways: It necessitates long-range social planning, changes educational relationships, enhances community and individual development, improves the accessibility of education, fosters the development of all channels of communication, and it can be used as an instrument of the government.

The struggle to develop and maintain an image of a quality institution affects both the students and their employers. Before one stops asking the question, "What is this new institution?" one begins asking the question, "What is the proof of its legitimacy?" When these questions are raised, the new institution must be able to point to more than the law that created it. However, since most of the students attending DEUs are employed, the reputations of these institutions are soon known by all who are really concerned. If the image is poor, then its social impact may be little or negative. But if it can develop a strong, positive image, then it can have a strong, positive impact on society.

A distance education university in a Latin American culture has the potential of being a major social change agent. Most of the changes are connected with the student and his or her life in the local social system. Perhaps the most dramatic and long lasting effects of distance education are the changes it mediates in the students. They must take the initiative in their education, learn how to study on their own, and realize

that they are the only ones responsible for their education. In short, they must become assertive, self-directed persons able to function in a complex system.

The above attributes can only help to develop a forward looking innovative, active society. The social, occupational, and intellectual dimensions of a culture all benefit from the presence of a DEU. The social impact of such an institution is seen more easily and quickly in developing countries, but it is present in all countries. In my last trip to Cost Rica I found that in three years UNED had become a password all over the country. Everyone was aware of it, was glad it was there, and accepted it as a positive force in the social environment.

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